

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Anthony Levern Howard,)	C/A No. 3:10-2514-CMC-JRM
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
vs.)	REPORT AND
)	RECOMMENDATION
Jeffery Howard,)	
)	
Defendant.)	
_____)	

The plaintiff, Anthony Levern Howard (“Plaintiff”), brings this action *pro se*, representing himself, and files this action *in forma pauperis* under 28 U.S.C. § 1915.¹ The complaint names an individual, unrelated to the plaintiff, as the sole defendant. Plaintiff claims the defendant misappropriated the plaintiff’s social security check, and he seeks return of the funds. The complaint should be dismissed for lack of jurisdiction.

Pro Se and In Forma Pauperis Review

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* complaint pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915. This review has been conducted in light of the following precedents: *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. 1937 (2009); *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); *Nasim v. Warden, Md. House of Corr.*, 64 F.3d 951 (4th Cir. 1995) (*en banc*); *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70 (4th Cir. 1983).

The complaint has been filed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915, which permits an indigent

¹ Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. §636(b)(1)(B), and Local Rule 73.02(B)(2)(d), D.S.C., the undersigned is authorized to review such complaints for relief and submit findings and recommendations to the District Court.

litigant to commence an action in federal court without prepaying the administrative costs of proceeding with the lawsuit. To protect against possible abuses of this privilege, the statute allows a district court to dismiss the case upon a finding that the action “is frivolous or malicious,” “fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted,” or “seeks monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such relief.” 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). A finding of frivolousness can be made where the complaint “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Denton*, 504 U.S. at 31. Hence, under § 1915(e)(2)(B), a claim based on a meritless legal theory may be dismissed *sua sponte*. *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. 319; *Allison v. Kyle*, 66 F.3d 71 (5th Cir. 1995).

This Court is required to liberally construe *pro se* documents, *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89 (2007), by holding them to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys. *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976), *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 5 (1980) (*per curiam*). A federal district court is charged with liberally construing a complaint filed by a *pro se* litigant to allow the development of a potentially meritorious case. *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. at 9 (1980); *Cruz v. Beto*, 405 U.S. 319 (1972). The mandated liberal construction afforded to *pro se* pleadings means that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the plaintiff could prevail, it should do so, but a district court may not rewrite a petition to include claims that were never presented, *Barnett v. Hargett*, 174 F.3d 1128, 1133 (10th Cir. 1999), or construct the plaintiff's legal arguments for him, *Small v. Endicott*, 998 F.2d 411, 417-18 (7th Cir. 1993), or “conjure up questions never squarely presented” to the court, *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985). The requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep’t of Soc. Servs.*, 901

F.2d 387, (4th Cir. 1990).

Discussion

For this Court to hear and decide a case, the Court must first have jurisdiction over the subject matter of the litigation. Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, and a “district court must jealously protect its jurisdiction, declining to entertain those cases over which it has no jurisdiction but insisting on hearing those matters properly before it.” *Woodward v. Newcourt Commercial Finance Corp.*, 60 F. Supp. 2d 530, 531 (D.S.C. 1999). Because federal courts have limited subject matter jurisdiction, there is no presumption that the court has jurisdiction. *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick*, 191 F.3d 394, 399 (4th Cir. 1999)(citing *Lehigh Mining & Mfg. Co. v. Kelly*, 160 U.S. 337, 327 (1895)). The issue of subject matter jurisdiction “may be raised at any time by either party or sua sponte by this court.” *Plyler v. Moore*, 129 F.3d 728, 731 n. 6 (4th Cir.1997). “Furthermore, it is always incumbent upon a federal court to evaluate its jurisdiction *sua sponte*, to ensure that it does not decide controversies beyond its authority.” *Davis v. Pak*, 856 F.2d 648, 650 (4th Cir. 1988). Although the absence of subject matter jurisdiction may be raised at any time during the case, determining jurisdiction at the outset of the litigation is the most efficient procedure. *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999).

The complaint does not allege facts that establish federal jurisdiction. The complaint alleges the defendant, who is not related to Plaintiff, became the “payee representative” for Plaintiff’s social security benefits check upon Plaintiff’s request. In September of 2009, Plaintiff’s check was mailed to the defendant’s address, and the Social Security Administration has confirmed that the check was cashed. But Plaintiff alleges he never received the check. The defendant made several excuses to Plaintiff and offered to assist Plaintiff

financially, but failed to act on his promises. Plaintiff seeks monetary damages of one thousand eight hundred and nine dollars (\$1,809.00), the amount of the benefits check.

The essential allegations of the complaint are insufficient to show that the case is one “arising under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States.” 28 U.S.C. § 1331. That is, the complaint does not state a claim cognizable under this Court’s “federal question” jurisdiction. Plaintiff’s allegations do not contain any specific reference to violation of any federal statute or constitutional provision by the defendant, nor is any type of federal question jurisdiction otherwise evident from the face of the complaint. The only reasonable construction of Plaintiff’s complaint is that it is a dispute involving the conversion of Plaintiff’s property. Generally, such disputes are a matter of state law to be heard in the state courts, unless diversity jurisdiction is present.

A federal district court may have jurisdiction of claims based on state law if diversity jurisdiction exists. The diversity statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a), requires complete diversity of parties and an amount in controversy in excess of seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000.00). Complete diversity of parties in a case means that no party on one side may be a citizen of the same state as any party on the other side. *See Owen Equip. & Erection Co. v. Kroger*, 437 U.S. 365, 372-74 & nn. 13-16 (1978). The complaint establishes, through the addresses provided for the parties, that both reside in South Carolina. Further, the amount in controversy is less than seventy-five thousand dollars. This Court does not have diversity jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1332 over any state law claims in this case. The complaint fails to establish jurisdiction in this Court.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the District Judge dismiss the complaint *without prejudice* and without issuance and service of process. **Plaintiff's attention is directed to the important notice on the next page.**



Joseph R. McCrorey
United States Magistrate Judge

November 16, 2010
Columbia, South Carolina

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. “[I]n the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must ‘only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.’” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005) (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 72 advisory committee’s note).

Specific written objections must be filed within fourteen (14) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b); *see* Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a), (d). Filing by mail pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
901 Richland Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).